

Remarks to Operation Allied Force Troops at Aviano Air Base in Italy

June 22, 1999

Thank you very much. Well, Captain Davis, you are a pretty tough act to follow—[laughter]—and not short of self-confidence, either. That's good. [Laughter] I'd like to begin by saying that Hillary and I are delighted to be back in Aviano. We have been here several times to thank you, but never on an occasion more important than this.

I thank the Italian Minister of Defense, Mr. Scognamiglio, and his government and his Prime Minister, for their leadership, their strength, and their support for NATO during this operation. They have been terrific, and I thank them.

I would like to also say a special word of appreciation to our NATO Commander, our SACEUR, General Wes Clark, who led this conflict to a successful conclusion. Thank you, General Clark.

I want to thank Colonel Durigon, the Italian Base Commander; Ambassador Tom Foglietta, our Ambassador to Italy; Ambassador Lindy Boggs, our Ambassador to the Holy See. And, General Leaf, I want to thank you for your leadership and your remarkable statement here today.

We have been on a long trip to Europe. I have been, at various times, with not only Hillary and Chelsea but with Secretary of State Albright and National Security Adviser Berger, a large number of other people, on a long, long week very important to America. But I did not want to leave without having the chance to thank those of you who protect our freedom every single day, who fought for human dignity and won its cause in Kosovo. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Since the beginning of Operation Allied Force, I have actually traveled to six other bases involved in this effort: in the United States—Norfolk, Barksdale, and Whiteman in America; Spangdahlem, Ramstein, Ingleheim in Germany. But I wanted to come here to say a special word of thanks to the 16th Air Force, the 31st Air Expeditionary Wing, because of what you have done in Kosovo, because of the role this base played in Bosnia. You have repeatedly put your lives on the line to save the lives of inno-

cent civilians and turn back the tide of ethnic cleansing. Thank you again for this noble endeavor.

In 79 days, you did prove that a sustained air campaign under the right conditions can stop an army on the ground. The Serb forces have withdrawn from Kosovo; 20,000 allied KFOR troops are already in. You also stopped a vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing and made it possible for us to reverse it. Protected by a peacekeeping force that includes NATO, Russia, and many other nations, the refugees are going back home. They have given new meaning, and you have given new meaning, to the motto of the 31st Fighter Wing. Thanks to you, they "Return With Honor."

Now that the conflict has been won, it is imperative that we and our NATO Allies and the others working with us win the peace. No one thinks it will take hold without difficulty. As more and more light is shed on those burned villages and even more mass graves than we dared to imagine, we become more and more appalled by the dark vision of Mr. Milosevic, and more and more certain we were right to stop it.

We have to win the peace with the same qualities with which you won the conflict—with determination and patience, with discipline and precision. We learned yesterday, again, that this, too, is a dangerous mission as we mourn the loss of two British soldiers who gave their lives trying to clear mines out of a house where they were placed solely to kill the returning refugees.

But thanks to you, the worst is already over in Kosovo. And tomorrow's dictators in other places will have to now take a harder look before they try to destroy or expel an entire people simply because of their race or religion.

General Leaf called you a championship team. Those are words well chosen. As he said, over 30,000 sorties flown, about 9,000 from here at Aviano, with zero combat fatalities; two planes down, both from here. In each case, the pilot recovered, first in 6 hours, the second in an hour and a half. That is a truly astonishing record.

And of course, we remember our two Army airmen who died in a training exercise